

*By Kevin Carbery, Suburban Journals*

New legislation gives Head Start programs more leeway, but a local Head Start director hopes to never have to trim her enrollment to stay afloat.

President George W. Bush signed the Head Start Reauthorization bill into law in December. The bill passed in the House May 2, when U.S. Rep. Russ Carnahan, D-St. Louis, offered an amendment to the Improving Head Start Act of 2007. The amendment allows Head Start grantees to negotiate a funded enrollment level with the Department of Health and Human Services if funding for the program does not keep pace with inflation.

"Studies have shown that Head Start children experience increased achievement test scores, lower incidence of grade repetition, reduced special education needs and higher graduation rates," Carnahan said. "My amendment gives Head Start grantees the ability to preserve the quality of their local programs."

A Carnahan aide explained that the congressman saw the need for the amendment after realizing that several groups in the St. Louis metro area have been struggling to provide Head Start programs.

Bev Henry, director of the Jefferson-Franklin Community Action Corporation Head Start Program, said she is glad to have more discretion over how to deal with increased operational costs due to the passage of the amendment.

"It does give us the ability to survive a crisis until things improve," she said.

However, it would be heartbreaking to have to cut any youngsters out of a Head Start program, she said. Head Start programs address health and education needs of preschool children in low-income homes.

"We would never lower our enrollment unless there were no other options," she said.

The Jefferson-Franklin Community Action Corporation Head Start administrative office moved to a new building at 305 Third St. in Hillsboro on Jan. 8. There are 415 children in the local program attending preschool in eight different buildings in Jefferson and Franklin counties.

Henry said another alteration to Head Start is that more people are now eligible to use it.

"The working poor now are covered in it," she said. "Now, in certain cases, we can help people at 130 percent of the poverty level. They had been in a situation where they made too much money for Head Start, but not enough to cover day care."

She said what Head Start really needs is more money.

"We still have financial concerns," Henry said. "There's been no increase in funding, even though costs have gone up."

Still, Henry said her organization hopes to assist as many families as it can.

"Head Start is always looking to serve children from low-income families," she said.

For more information about the Jefferson-Franklin Community Action Corporation Head Start program, call 636-789-3563.

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